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ABSTRACT

For the past 10 summers a rural Ohio farm family, convinced of the merits of involving children in farm experiences and/or plant and animal care, has shared its farmstead with approximately 3,000 urban elementary school children. This paper discusses the impact of farm experiences on children's development, exploring rural community life among the Amish, Maria Montessori's views of the value of farm experience, and British integrated day schools. American Amish society, particularly, is seen as lacking the neurotic symptoms of industrial society. It is asserted that (1) some of the qualities characteristic of Amish society were idealized by Maria Montessori; (2) Montessori's "erdkinder" schools look in many ways like today's Amish family life; (3) British integrated day schools attempted to provide an education based on the farm experience to post-World War II schoolchildren; (4) children's learning environments require proper scale and relevance, qualities inherent in farm life. Specific character traits which might develop among children involved in small scale relevant learning environments such as Amish society, the erdkinder, and the family farm include respect for nature and understanding of nature's generosity, the habit of observing life, foresight, responsible community participation, and a certain equilibrium of conscience, resulting from the knowledge that one has given one's best effort at all times. (RH)

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THE FARM EXPERIENCE; ITS IMPORTANCE IN A CHILDS LIFE

It's lambing time and Maggie, our thirteen year old shepherdess has been busy nonstop assisting at birthings, bottle feeding orphans, sewing jackets for lambs, docking tails, giving injections, dipping navels and doing all the other important jobs that are necessary at this time of year. In between times Maggie takes notes on these events for an article she is writing on the care of domestic sheep. Maggie has been raising sheep since acquiring her first lamb, Fluff, at age three. This work with animals has been a cornerstone of Maggie's education and development as a human being.

As recently as one hundred years ago no one questioned the importance of the care of domestic animals and plants in the life of the child. Most people lived on farms and agricultural pursuits were part and parcel of the fabric of life. The benefits of these activities in terms of a person's intellectual, moral and social development were simply taken for granted. They formed the foundation of a young persons life, a life which in those days was a comparatively simple, people scale process and for most lacking in the major neurotic symptoms of the present day.

This changed with the industrialization that drew most of America's manpower off the farm and into the cities. It would

be a simplification to suggest that todays "growing up" problems could be solved by a return to the rural lifestyle of the last century and this is not my intent. There is much wisdom, however, to be gleaned by looking back. One needn't in fact go to the history books and other secondary sources for this input since here and there are located "living" pockets of ninteenth century technology; little monasteries of truth, so to speak, among nomadic tribes and agricultural villages in various parts of the world. Right here in America our own Amish communities are graphic examples providing much food for thought. Relatively oblivious to the influences of the surrounding world, Amish society looks much like a rural monastic community.

I think what has impressed me most about the Amish is that their survival these four hundred years seems to be rooted in a commitment to a principle which keeps them tied to the work of the land. They have never in fact left the stage of settled agriculture to join the rest of us in cities and towns. Whenever they do they seem to be immediately absorbed and then fall victim to the major neurosis of the times. Amish society exists as a sort of living fossil. A look at it gives us a glimpse of some things we abandoned when we left the farm <u>en masse</u> a century ago. While we all have something to learn from this model, our children stand to gain the most for it is to them that the future belongs. Let us key in on sme qualities of Amish life that will be of interest to us asparents.

Many years ago U.N.E.S.C.O. conducted a study of various societies throughout the world that lacked the major neurotic

symptoms of today's western industrial life. In their research they sought common factors running throughout these societies, variables common to all and associated with "social health". Most of these factors are present in today's Amish communities and I believe this partly explains the absence among the Amish of many, if not most, of the personal and social problems of our time. Further, it is my suggestion that exposing the young child to this kind of society implants a model in the child's mind, an image upon which s/he can later draw.

Let's focus for a moment on these factors associated with "social health". Amish life is characterized by slow change. Change is so slow no one even notices it. The result is a certain calm and serenity among these people. Groupings in Amish society are small and people scale. Businesses, churches, families are all in close proximity to one another. Everyone knows everyone. Everyone senses his own importance, knows his own place in the community. Belonging is automatic. People are born, live and die within the matrix of this community. No one is left out, ever. No one stands alone. Finally, and certainly not least important, all aspects of Amish community life are integrated. There are no dramatic divisions between work and play, one's work <u>is</u> one's play; between young and old, all ages mix together in the family and workplace; between church and community, a common set of beliefs binds individuals and families together. Growing up, therefore, is a relatively smooth process of gradual transitions from stage to stage. A person is always aware of what will come next in life.

To many this may sound dreadfully restricting of one's freedom of choice. Life, however, always involves choices. One cannot do everything. Even the Amish are free to "go English" if they wish. Few do. Why? Because when you're satisfied you generally stay put. Naturally, Amish society is not without its problems. However, having lived among them for 11 years I know from experience that they have many fewer problems than those of the English community that exists around them. What we do not have in common are those several traits listed above. A commitment to the work of the land, slow change, small social units, an integrated society and automatic acceptance.

Maria Montessori idealized many of the same qualities we see characteristic of Amish society.

> "My vision of the future is no longer of people taking examinations and proceeding on that certification from the secondary school to the university but of individuals passing from one stage of independence to a higher by means of their own activity through their own effort of will..." (From Childhood to Adolescence)

It is certainly no accident that Montessori would place the adolescent on the farm during this time of transition to adulthood. The farm provides not only an environment of relevance but also a scale of community fully comprehensible to the child. She was well aware of the many benefits of farm life and felt that rural experiences would "make real" so to speak the more formal academic studies offering the emerging adult both ciizenship training through participation in the total world of the farm and technical expertise through the vast curriculum potential of the farm environment.

> "Work on the land is an introduction both to nature and to civilization and gives a limitless field for scientific and historic studies...we have called these children erdkinder (land children) because they are learning about civilization through its origin in agriculture...They are learning of the beginning of civilization that occured when the tribes settled on the land and began a life of peace and progress while the nomads remained barbarians and warriors...Just as nature is brought by the labor of man to higher degree of beauty and usefulness, so man must raise himself to a state that is higher than his natural state, and the land child must see that society is in a state of ascent from nature in which he, as a civilized man must play his part." (From Childhood to Adolescence)

On the farm the child has an opportunity to understand through his own personal experience the development of human society as

> "Man passed from the natural (hunting) to the artificial (civilized) state through agriculture: when he discovered the secret of intensifying the production of the soil, he obtained the reward of civilization."

Montessori's erdkinder schools look in many ways like today's Amish family life. Both models offer the child a peek into and perhaps some understanding of our larger human society. Both Amish society and the small farm life of the erdkinder are worlds in a microcosm. They resemble a child's aquarium. Loren Eiseley in his autobiography (Excavation of a Life) writes that his most important experience as a child involved building an aquarium. Eiseley details the deep impression made on him of the process involved in creating and maintaining this living world in a microcosm. He asserts that his later work on man's place in history is rooted in this experience as a youth manipulating and observing natural processes on a small scale. The key word here is scale. Whenever a child's experience is scaled to his ability to understand whatever is

occuring around him and when he actually plays a significant role in these processes then both learning and feelings of self-worth are dramatically increased.

Not only is proper scale called for in the child's learning environment but also relevance is necassary. Too often most of what passes for education today is a collection of dispirate, unrelated, sometimes incomprehensible and usually irrevelant facts. One parent wrote to us several years ago;

> "When the rewards of our work are in a paycheck, deposited and not even seen by the youngsters, it seems that there is no real sense of accomplishment or value for them. We want our kids to keep their noses to the grindstone and they never know why until after their education."

William Glasser (Schools Without Failure) is more direct

> "Where relevance is absent from the curriculum children do not gain the motivation to learn. All facets of the curriculum must be related to the child's life."

¶ The foregoing might lead us to conclude that children can experience not only greater emotional stability, but also gain broad ranging knowledge and insights into human society through personal involvment with small scale relevant learning environments (e.g. Amish society, the erdkinder, the family farm). Now lets probe a little deeper and ask what specific character traits might be developed through a child's work with plants and animals in particular? Chapter X of The Montessori Method, The Child and Nature, deals with this very question. Montessori point out that in work with plants and animals children develop a respect for nature and come to understand what every farmer knows; that she rewards our efforts with a generosity far in excess of our labor input. This can be a humbling insight for the growing child. Montessori goes on to elaborate how agriculture establishes the habit of observation of the phenomina of life. No farmer or gardener can hope to

succeed without noting the life processes occuring in the plant or animal they are husbanding. Such habits of observation are of lifelong benefit. This is, in fact, the basic stuff of science. By way of example; for three years our son Daniel, now age 11, has worked with poultry, first with layers, then with a flock of bantams and now with an incubator. On a small scale he has experienced all the processes involved with housing, feeding, reproduction and marketing management of poultry. This effort has immersed Dan for an extended period in the hypothesis and trial and error experimentation of the natural science activity that poultry keeping actually is. Constant observation is a necessary requirement of this activity. And this is just one of many real, not labratory, farm activities in which Daniel participates.

Foresight is another byproduct of agricultural pursuits. Early failures teach the would-be gardener the value of care, attention to detail, diligence and planning. The habit of foresight is at the root of one's sense of responsibility. Two years ago four of our children collected silver maple seeds from the trees in the spring, planted and successfully grew them in pots out of doors. Their plan was to provide summer shade for the sheep. So the next spring they transplanted the small saplings to carefully prepared beds along the fence line. They built chicken wire gaurds for protection from nibbling sheep, ponies or wild rabbits. After two years these fast growing trees had reached beyond the chicken wire tree guards. Promptly the ponies cropped off the tender greenery. Now it is winter

and the children are busy planning wider and taller gourds for their young trees. Success in efforts such as these comes as a direct result of foresight.

Routine care of plants and animals develops the habit of being a responsible participant in the community - a form of citizenship training. This in turn fosters a certain equilibrium of conscience, a by product of knowing one puts one's "best effort" out at all times. This balance of conscience is manifest in those attitudes of patience and confidence common to country folk everywhere. Patience, confidence and foresight are displayed for example, by the farm mother who, if in close touch with the life cycles on the farm, is encouraged to follow natural patterns in nurturing her own offspring. One's ability to nurture is strengthened by the activity of observing and caring for plants and animals.

Now, we all value these qualities and seek to foster them in our children. It is my conviction that serious work with animals and plants is simply one of the most efficient ways of going about developing them. Ask any urban grandma or grandpa who came off the farm. You will undoubtedly find agreement. Marjorie Kahl Lawrence grew up in the predominantly rural America of the early 20th century. Her wonderful little book (<u>This is the Way it Used to be in the Early 1900s</u>) gives a child's eye glimpse of life in those days.

> "There have always been cities, and people in cities have always lived a different kind of life than those who lived in the country or in small towns. In the city you buy what you need; in the country you do the best you can with what you have. They used knowledge and skill in place of money, and there is a satisfaction in that which money can never replace.
>
> In our household, each member of the family had certain responsibilities. We were each a part of the establishment. Our work was important to the whole family,

simple as it might be. That made us feel important and useful, and that is a very good feeling.

We children did the running... We loved to do the running. It was more fun than television. And what is more, we were useful. We were helping. We were needed.

When you had done your work, you felt you had accomplished something worthwhile. Play was more fun after you had finished your work. And with most things, you didn't have to ask where they came from because you knew. You had helped with it.

An egg for breakfast meant a lot more to you when it was your job to take care of the chickens, than it would have if it had come from a store.

We learned many important things. We learned to use our hands and our wits to satisfy our needs. We learned real skills that stood us in good stead the rest of our lives. We learned that we didn't have to have everything 'that struck our fancy.' Money was scarcer than hen's teeth. An allowance for a child was unheard of. A nickle or a dime to spend was a fortune so we learned to think a long while before we spent it. We understood that money does not buy happiness. Happiness is inside yourself and there are many other things that bring happiness, and satisfaction, which is even more important than happiness.

We had 'togetherness' without striving for it. Our lives were built that way. It was a sort of feeling that 'we are all in this together and the best way is to all work together to make it go".

My wife, Penny, grew up on a Missouri farm and long yearned to return to this setting she had known as a child and my own experience with ten years of Boy Scouting provided me with something of a "root" in the soil. These related experiences united us in inspiration upon hearing a lecture by Margaret Homfray and Phoebe Child during our Montessori training in London in 1970. The topic: The wartime experiences of British children. The upshot: A lesson in school reform with many implications. During the blitz of W.W.II British cities were unsafe places for children. Accordingly, the authorities moved children and teachers wholesale to the countryside where they resided on farms for the duration of the war. Upon returning to the cities afterwards the teachers and children found it

impossible to carry on as they had in prewar days. They proceeded to reorganize the schools into natural or family groupings and attempted to convert abstract academic studies into meaningful feality based learning experiences. This, a grass roots revolution in education, later was latinized as the "British integrated day" and exported to this country where as would be expected it did not take on as well as it had in Britain. The point is not whether or not the schools were better or worse after the changes, but that there was a deeply felt need for reform based on the farm experience.

For the past ten summers my family has shared its rural Ohio farmstead with what now totals some 3000 urban elementary school age children. In a sense this has been our equivalent of the wartime experience of the British Children and their teachers. We now firmly believe in work with domestic plants and animals preferably in the family farm environment as an efficient "teaching machine". We also believe in relevance; i.e. that children develop character, intelligence, wisdom, judgment and the motivation to learn through participation in real work that really counts. Few environments offer a broader range of opportunities for fulfillment of this requirement than the family farmstead and few activities yield a greater scope for personal growth than the care and nurture of domestic plants and animals.

We have received stacks of "love letters" from the parents of children who have stayed with us confirming the merit of

the farm experience and most of these are based on only one week's exposure.

> "The week was one of the fullest yet most peaceful she has ever experienced."
> "Your farm provides a quiet, sane, stable foundation for kids in the midst of a dramatic and difficult world."
> "We were so pleased with the reinforcement of personal responsibility...she continues to weave on a two harness loom and her interest in biology and plant study is growing."
> "We noticed a distinct change in his behavior and attitude. He seemed very serene and amiable."
> "Children too need to feel that what they do is necessary, important and appreciated...that feeling came across strongly...they were treated like people."
> "Carrie comes back...looking somehow more robust, more at ease in accepting responsibility, more willing to pitch in at home. When she returned she actually went looking for chores."
> "One week at your farm did him more good than the last whole year of school."
> "They seemed fully transformed into some kind of juvenile sainthood. The time spent at the farm reinforced values of discipline, caring, detail and patience. The timeless lifestyle in your area impressed me when contrasted to the kind of everchanging world we live in."
> "You taught her the love of the soil, nature, animal-kind and human-kind and that the preservation of that happy state of nature where all had value and a place to exist was close to the ideal."
> "Something in their eyes bowled me over it was so visible. I haven't been able to hang words on it yet but I think it is related to an inner awareness of competence and something to do with cooperation with life."

This is not to say that other settings cannot develop these qualities and in fact we feel that many benefits of the farm environment can occur within other carefully designed environments. Numerous strategies may be employed in the non-farm setting. A Columbus, Ohio family for example recently described to us how their very successful Amway business involves participation by every member of the family. They called it their

urban farmstead. The results seem in many ways to be similiar to the outcomes we have observed on the farm. Not withstanding other designs, however, we feel strongly that there are some benifits that can only result from direct work with plants and animals.

If you become as convinced as we are of the merits of involving your child with a farm experience and/or the care of plants and animals, you will be asking; how do we provide this? It's easier than one might think. People living in rural or semirural areas will have no difficulty. Those in urban settings will need to either find a country experience for their children, not at all impossible, or get busy with home businesses, backyard rabbitries, bees, gardening, aquaria, dogs, cats - you name it. Back issues of "The Mother Earth News" are an excellent source of inspiration and information.